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Zeman, Dan

Relativism and bound predicates of personal taste: an answer to Schaffer's argument from binding

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This article deals with the formal semantics of natural language sentences expressing judgments of personal taste. While in sentences like *Avocados are tasty for John* (1) the “judge”—i.e., the person who evaluates the object at issue—is made explicit, the judge remains implicit in simple sentences like *Avocados are tasty* (2). “Contextualists” assume that predicates like *tasty* are really binary, as they appear to be in (1), and that the missing argument in (2) is supplemented by the context. “Relativists”, on the other hand, assume that predicates of personal taste like *tasty* are always monadic ones. For them the truth-values of sentences expressing judgments of personal taste depend on a judge parameter in the same way as the truth-values of formulas of modal logic depend on a possible-world parameter or that of tense logic on a time parameter. The “argument from binding”—alluded to in the article’s title—is a line of reasoning put forward by the contextualist in order to support her/his position. The argument starts from the observation that occurrences of the adjective *tasty* may be bound by a natural language quantifier as, e.g., in the sentence *Everyone got something tasty* (3) which can be understood as expressing that everyone at issue got something which was tasty for her or him. For the contextualist, this proves *tasty* to be a binary relation (x is tasty for y) whose second argument position in sentence (3) is bound by the initial quantifier. Hence the contextualist concludes the predicate to be binary in sentences (2) and as well.

The contextualist-relativist-distinction drawn by Zeman is explicated by him in more formal terms within a Kaplan-style two-stage approach to semantics [cf. Themes from Kaplan, 481–564, Oxford Univ. Press, New York, 1989]. In Kaplan’s semantics expressions have “characters” which are functions mapping contexts to “contents”. A context is a complex of various factors—such as, e.g., the time and place of utterance, the speaker, etc. The content of an expression in a context c is that what is communicated by it given the conditions specified by c . Thus, for instance, the content of a sentence in c would be a proposition which is construed by Kaplan as a function mapping times and possible worlds to truth values. More generally, contents are functions from “circumstances of evaluation” to suitable denotations: e.g., truth-values in the case of sentences or individuals in the case of terms. Simplifying somehow Zeman’s characterization of contextualism and relativism, one may say that a semantician taking a contextualist attitude towards an expression E assumes that the (in a pre-theoretical sense) contextual factors by which E influences the truth-value of “simple” sentences in which it occurs are “content-determinative” (p. 158) whereas the relativist takes them to be “circumstance-determining” (p. 158). Simple sentences, as defined by Zeman (p. 158), are sentences which contain neither indexicals (expressions referring to the context) nor phrases (like, e.g., *for John* in (1)) which modify co-occurring phrases by delivering an argument expression to them.

So the problem here is how the contextual factors which influence an expression's impact upon the truth-values of sentences in which it occurs are to be divided into components of the context (in the technical sense) on the one hand and circumstances of evaluation on the other. However, the question is not just whether such a factor is a context component or belongs to the circumstances of evaluation since there may be an overlap between them in both Kaplan's original framework for his logic of demonstratives and Zeman's treatment of predicates of personal taste. Zeman discusses this question of overlap at some length at the beginning of his article; cf. p. 156f. He ultimately argues that the distinction between components of the context and circumstances of evaluation is exclusive on the level of simple sentences (as just defined). Nevertheless he (as already said) explicitly states for his semantics of predicates of personal taste that a judge is both a component of the context and one of the circumstances of evaluation as well; cf. p. 171. Thus his statement concerning simple sentences can only be interpreted as saying that only one of the two "judge-factors", either the "judge circumstance" or the "judge of the context" can be operative in the semantic interpretation of those sentences though both are present in the general semantic framework for some reason or other. The issue separating in Zeman's view of the affair relativists from contextualists may be then formulated as follows. Let E be an expression and a an assignment specifying values for the variables (or, rather, the variable-like natural language expressions) occurring in E . Let, furthermore, c be a context and j_c the judge specified by it; and let finally w (possible world) and j (judge) be circumstances of evaluation (j need not be identical with j_c). Assume then that in order to determine the denotation $|E|^{a,c,w,j}$ of E under a at c relative to w and j one has to know who the judge is. Should one then choose j or rather j_c ? Zeman's point in his article is that in the case of predicates of personal taste the argument from binding does not decide the matter in favour of j_c . A predicate like *tasty* need not be interpreted as an implicitly binary predicate to which the context c at issue delivers its component j_c as an argument. Instead we may take that predicate as a monadic one—as its occurrence in (2) suggests. When, as in the cases of (1) and (3), a reference to the judge is made this is done by employing the judge-circumstance of evaluation.

Hence Zeman proposes to identify the content $|tasty|^{a,c}$ of the adjective *tasty* under the variable assignment a (which is redundant here since *tasty* is a constant) in context c with the function $\lambda w j. \lambda x. [x \text{ is tasty in } w \text{ for } j]$. Since this function is independent of c , it is also the content of the adjective in any other context c' . Consequently, the proposition $\lambda w j. [\text{Avocados are tasty in } w \text{ for } j]$ expressed by (2) according to the relativist position would then be the same in each context and sentence (2) would have what Kaplan calls a "stable" character. On the premises of the contextualist hypothesis, however, $|tasty|^{a,c}$ would be $\lambda w j. \lambda x. \lambda y. [x \text{ is tasty for } y \text{ in } w]$ and the proposition expressed by (2), namely $\lambda w j. \lambda x. \lambda y. [x \text{ Avocados are tasty for } j_c \text{ in } w]$, would depend on the context c . Hence sentence (2) would express different propositions in different contexts and thus have a variable character. The special type of context-dependency of the adjective *tasty* renders it thus content-determinative.

The problem for the relativist is to show how explicit information concerning the judge as in (1) can be combined with her/his analysis of predicates of personal taste as monadic

ones. For this Zeman employs François Recanati's idea of "variadic functions" [*Literal Meaning*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004, (pp. 107–109)]. A variadic function is an higher-order function which changes the arity of its lower-order argument. Zeman conceives of the denotation (relative to context c and judge j) of the preposition *for* occurring in (1) as a variadic function $|for|^{a,c,w,j} = \lambda x.\lambda f.\lambda y.[f(y) \wedge x = j]$ which maps objects x , unary functions f from objects to truth-values, and objects y to the truth-value $f(y) \wedge x = j$. Letting then $|John|^{a,c,j,w} = \text{John}$, the denotation of the prepositional phrase *for John* is $|for|^{a,c,j,w}(|John|^{a,c,j,w}) = \lambda f.\lambda y.[f(y) \wedge \text{John} = j]$. Finally, the denotation of the predicate phrase *tasty for John* is $\lambda f.\lambda y.[f(y) \wedge \text{John} = j](|tasty|^{a,c,w,j}) = \lambda y.[|tasty|^{a,c,w,j}(y) \wedge j = \text{John}]$. According to the above given relationist explanation of $|tasty|^{a,c}$, this is the function $\lambda y.[y \text{ is judged tasty for } j \text{ in } w \wedge j = \text{John}]$ thus $\lambda y.[y \text{ is judged tasty for John in } w]$.

In order to derive a semantic representation of sentence (3) along similar lines, Zeman makes use of two additional hypotheses: (A) he assumes that, on some level of linguistic description accessible to the rules of semantic interpretation, sentence (3) contains an implicit *for*-phrase differing from the *for*-phrase in (1) only by having an empty (phonetically null) argument contributing a variable ranging over judges instead of a noun phrase denoting such a judge. (B) He assumes furthermore that the rules of semantic interpretation implement a mechanism which allows the quantifier *Everyone* to bind both the variable occupying the subject argument place of *got* and the variable introduced by the empty element of the *for*-phrase; cf. the pattern of occurrences of the variable " x " in the *ad-hoc* first-order rendering $\forall x.[\text{Person}(x) \rightarrow \exists y.[\text{Thing}(y) \wedge \text{Got}(x, y) \wedge \text{Tasty For}(x, y)]]$ of (3). Problems arising from (B) are discussed by Zeman in the last section of his paper in which he defends his analysis.

One will admit that Zeman is able to derive plausible semantic representations of sentences like (1), (2), and (3) on relativistic premises. Given this, however, the question arises why a context c in Zeman's framework still has to contain a judge j_c . After all, for the relativist there seems to be nothing like a "personal taste indexical" which would make such a component of the context necessary.

Reviewed by Klaus Robering